

# MAKE THE MULCH OF IT

## What is mulch?

Mulch is a layer of material such as wood chips, bark, grass clippings, leaves, or compost placed on the soil surface around plants and trees.

## Why mulch?

Put your yard debris and fallen branches to use. Using mulch is a simple way to recycle yard and woody wastes, and improve your soil. A good mulch does the following:

- Increases moisture retention – meaning you can water less and conserve water
- Insulates the soil from cold in winter and heat in summer
- Inhibits weed growth – less weed pulling for you (see “A Word about weeds” below)
- Reduces soil erosion on slopes
- Minimizes soil compaction caused by foot traffic
- Provides nutrients for earthworms and other soil life which are necessary for healthy soil and plants

## Best uses for mulch

Different materials decompose at different rates, so it is best to use the right mulch for the setting. Here are some recommendations for mulch use:

- **Grass clippings** on beds in the spring – Clippings break down in a short time. Spread regularly in 1” thick layers over vegetable and flower beds (annuals and perennials), or mix with leaves. Thinner layers allow water to penetrate the soil and prevent matting.
- **Deciduous tree leaves** on beds in the fall – Deciduous leaves can be spread as mulch on vegetable and flower beds. Evergreen leaves take longer to decompose; they are best suited as a cover on pathways.
- **Compost** on beds year-round – Compost can be spread around beds once a year to add nutrients into the soil. Spreading compost in the fall will help smother winter and annual weeds; in the spring it will help retain winter moisture.
- **Chipped or shredded woody waste** around trees and bushes or on pathways – Wood waste takes longer to break down, and therefore can be used as a good cover. It also helps minimize weed growth. Spread 3-6 inches. To minimize weed growth even more, put cardboard down first and then cover with mulch.
- **Sawdust from untreated wood** around trees and bushes – Along with other finely-ground woody materials, sawdust can be used on the surface, but should not be mixed into the soil. These finely ground materials absorb nitrogen from the soil, causing plants to become yellow and stunted.



## A word about weeds

Most weeds like sun and bad soil. The best way to inhibit weed growth is to create healthy soil, strengthening your plants so that they out-compete the weeds. Reduce annual weeds such as chickweed, bluegrass, sowthistle, purslane, mallow, and shotweed by composting in the fall to smother their seeds. Reduce perennial weeds such as morning glory, buttercup, clover, horsetail, dandelion, and plantain through more mechanical means – mowing, cutting back repeatedly. For ideas on controlling perennial weeds, see <http://dnr.metrokc.gov/wlr/lands/weeds/index.htm>

## General mulching rules

- Mulch at any time, but early spring, before soil moisture has evaporated, is an excellent time.
- Weed the area before applying mulch.
- Spread around plants to the drip line (the diameter of the plant's outermost branches) or cover the entire garden bed.
- Keep mulch a few inches away from the trunks of trees and shrubs to prevent damage to the plants from disease and rodents.
- Spread a thin layer of mulch – 1 to 3 inches. Thick mulches are harmful to shallow-rooted plants such as rhododendrons and azaleas. Otherwise, 3” of mulch is safe for most woody plants, and up to 8” can be used for large trees.
- Especially on vegetable beds, avoid mulch that has been exposed to herbicides.
- Add more mulch every 2-3 years to perpetuate a supply of nutrients in the soil and maintain good soil coverage.

## How to make the best mulch

- **Leaves** – You can run over dry leaves with a rotary mower to make a fine-textured mulch for annuals and smaller plants.
- **Small branches** – Rent a small electric chipper to make a fine-textured mulch of woody stalks and branches up to 1-1/4” thick, or a gas-powered shredder that processes materials up to 3” thick.
- **Larger branches** – Rent a gas-powered chipper able to handle woody wastes up to 6” in diameter, or hire a chipping service to come to your house or neighborhood.

You can rent mulching tools and machines from some tool rental stores. Look under “Rental Service Stores and Yards” in the Yellow Pages. Call ahead, since not all tool rental stores carry chippers and shredders. A list of chipping services can be found on King County's website: [http://dnr.metrokc.gov/swd/resrecy/composting/yard\\_garden.shtml](http://dnr.metrokc.gov/swd/resrecy/composting/yard_garden.shtml).

For information on King County's waste reduction, recycling and composting programs, call the Recycling and Composting Information Line at **206-296-4466** or check the website: [www.metrokc.gov/soils](http://www.metrokc.gov/soils).



**King County**

Department of  
Natural Resources and Parks

**Solid Waste Division**